



The Drop-in

By HAL G. EVARTS

"I can get to sleep after I down this," he said by way of thanks. The old lady nodded her sympathily as she glanced at the clock.

A GROUP of four men on the veranda of the frame hotel constituted the sole evidence of life or human habitation. A stranger rendering snap judgment would have proclaimed Marsten a deserted mining-camp—whereas in reality it was not dead but merely wrapped in the lethargic inactivity of an inland county-seat town on a glaring Sunday afternoon.

The windows of the dozen buildings blinked lifelessly upon the dusty main thoroughfare. Off to the south the waves of gray sage rolled away to the far horizon. The white threads traversing the baked flats were roads converging on the town. On the north the hills rose green and cool. A little river poured from the mouth of a valley opening out back of the town, and a straggling line of cottonwoods marked the course of the stream across the flats.

A figure emerged from the fringe of trees and plodded toward the town.

"One of that outfit of sage-brushers that pulled in this morning and made camp on the creek," commented Fletcher, the hotel proprietor.

The others nodded and regarded the approaching pedestrian in silence. With three of the group—the proprietor of the general store, the hotelkeeper and the sheriff—this Sunday afternoon gathering was established custom. The fourth man was a newcomer. The pedestrian reached the raised board sidewalk that bordered the main street, his footsteps echoing hollowly as he

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headed for the group of men on the hotel porch. Accosting them, he made abrupt inquiry as to the possibility of purchasing supplies in Marsten on Sunday afternoon. Babson, the merchant, hitched his heavy frame from his chair and ambled across the street with the prospective customer to the general store.

"Likely he's wanting a quarter's worth of something Bob hasn't got in stock," Fletcher prophesied.

"And again, he may spring himself and purchase a hundred-dollar bill of goods," the sheriff stated. "No man can forecast the possibilities of a drop-in. He can count on his regular run of trade almost to a penny, after years of serving local folks across the counter; but a drop-in just can't be reckoned with in advance."

The hotelkeeper grinned and rolled an eye at the outsider.

"That's Turner's pet theory of life," he explained. "All things hinge on the drop-in. Turner, here, is the sheriff," he amplified, "and he chalks up his successes or failures to the drop-in."

The stranger was a reticent man and had contributed but little to the conversation. He now accorded Turner his close attention, as if estimating the caliber of the man who was sheriff of the county. Babson rejoined the group as the chance customer passed back down the street with his purchases. The sheriff reverted to his theory, addressing himself to the newcomer.

"And why not?" he demanded. "Mr. Ross will bear me out." The newcomer Ross nodded encouragement, and Turner stated

his thesis. The drop-in, he insisted, constituted the unknown element in every man's operations, the accidental speck which drops into the elaborately planned cogwheel of all mortal schemes and operates either to facilitate or to retard them, the unknown quantity which cannot be discounted in advance.

"He's the chance factor in every man's business," the sheriff elaborated. "The unexpected transient that drops in to brighten the business day by leaving outside dollars in the till; a stray passer-by who drops a chance remark which prevents the consummation of a sale."

Whenever the sheriff enlarged upon this favorite theme, it was inevitable that he would soon narrow it down to the manner in which it applied to his own profession; for Turner deemed the drop-in responsible for the early downfall of the criminally inclined. A crime might be planned to the most minute detail, he explained, the ground covered a dozen times and every element of chance eliminated. Then, at the psychological moment, the drop-in would saunter across the stage—a hobo crawling from the rods of a freight-car in the railroad yards, a belated reveler straying homeward along some darkened thoroughfare, the man who returned to his office at night for the first time in a dozen years, the loving couple spooning in the shadow of the schoolhouse.

"If you find it so easy to unravel a well-planned crime," said Ross, "then the average case, committed without forethought, would be quite simple."

"Queer about that," Turner observed. "The cleanest get-aways occur in the case of unpremeditated acts—a haphazard homicide or a robbery pulled off on the spur of the moment. The signs are disjointed and don't lead anywhere in particular. The trail shows incoherencies, so to speak, patterned on the thoughts and actions of the man who left it

after he'd realized that he was in considerable of a mess. The man on his track is handicapped by trying to reason out the next move of a human in a normal frame of mind. Even if you pick him up, it's a ten-to-one shot against conviction. The evidence shows so many apparent inconsistencies that the jury, thinking along normal lines, just can't conceive of a man's acting up thataway."

Ross nodded. "And a carefully planned affair," he encouraged, "what about that sort?"

"Every move dovetails into the next as natural as you please. Instead of a scattered pattern of inconsistencies, like a man leaves when he's in a panic, there's a sort of sequence of thought, and one logical mind can follow the progress of another. If you don't dwell too much on the obvious,—which you don't need to, for it'll speak for itself in any event,—but instead hunt for the bug under the chip, you'll most likely uncover it. With a scatter-brained misdeed, one more loose end doesn't signify much, for loose ends are the rule; but with a carefully thought-out affair, just one little flea-bit accident—one which no human ingenuity can foresee in advance—looms up big and operates to everlastingly cinch a man. The drop-in will down him sure."

The four men sat on in silence. Ross waited for the heat to lift before resuming his journey. Most men would have chafed against delay, but time meant nothing to Ross. The gray walls which had shut him off from the world for the better part of two decades had schooled him in patience. He pondered the substance of the sheriff's discourse. Was this oldish officer merely a pedantic theorist, or was he capable of a practical application of his theory?

Ross knew something of the path of the wrongdoer. As a boy he had schooled himself in petty thefts and had escaped detection. Later he had planned the robbery of the little

Then a sudden report jarred his eardrums, and a brilliant flame seemed to spurt straight for his eyes.



country bank for which he worked, and had planted evidence which would fasten the deed on a dissolute old fellow who lived on the outskirts of the town. But this disreputable character chanced to be in jail in a neighboring city, and Ross had been caught with mask and gun. The general sentiment of the bank's officials had tended toward leniency in view of the culprit's youth; but one director, a youngish farmer with sternly puritanical views, had turned the wrath of the righteous man upon the evildoer, and his representations had resulted in a sentence of twenty years for bank robbery. Without influence and lacking friends to bring his case before parole- and pardon-boards, Ross had served eighteen years; and through them all he had nursed a settled conviction that his plight was attributable to one man's interfering righteousness rather than to his own misdeed.

A cool breeze stole down the slope of the hills and lifted the oppressive blanket of heat. Ross picked up his battered suitcase and plodded along the road leading up the valley behind the town. He rounded a bend and passed from sight and from the thoughts of the three men on the hotel porch.

OVER a year later Ross sat in a little cabin a dozen miles up the valley. The dim rays of a kerosene lamp flickered down across a face drawn and furrowed by pain. Ross slumped forward in his chair, his elbows resting on the table to support his head. A whistling breath was expelled between set teeth; the sound, slight as it was, proved sufficient to reach the ears of the little old lady across the table, and Auntie Hodges looked up from her reading and clucked with ready sympathy. Presently the man rose and turned to his room.

There would be no more sound in the house that night. Ross had made it clear that the least noise or confusion, even the soft opening of his door to inquire as to his welfare, served only to bring on a recurrence of the pain. Quiet—absolute quiet; that was all he required to fight off an attack.

These spells always left Ross weak and faint, and he frequently felt the need of black coffee to strengthen him after one had passed. Auntie Hodges banked the fire in the kitchen range and left a pot of coffee to simmer on the back of it. Before retiring, she wound the clock on the mantles shelf, noting that the hands indicated eight-twenty-two.

Ross had thrown himself face down upon the bed after removing his shoes. Anyone glancing in upon him would have concluded that a stupor had brought partial relief from the pain. But the soft closing of Auntie Hodges' door seemed to revive him, and he rose and thrust an arm beneath his mattress. His groping fingers touched cold steel and recoiled from the contact, then persisted in their search for an article of different texture, and were eventually withdrawn, bringing forth a pair of moccasins. Donning these, Ross dropped from his open window and followed the ranch lane to the point where it led into the valley road. He struck a steady swinging jog-trot and headed upcountry. The road clung to the left-hand flank of the valley, skirting the base of a long spur that jutted out from the main mass of the hills. On the downhill side of the road the bottom-lands sloped away to the river; a few twinkling lights marked the sites of cabins along the course of the stream. Beyond these loomed the bulk of the hills on the far side of the valley.

The road reached the point of the outcropping spur, rounded it and turned back upon itself in a hairpin-bend along the opposite base. Something over two miles beyond this point the main thoroughfare looped back in another bend. A ranch-lane branched off toward a lighted window, the first house on the uphill side of the road. Auntie Hodges' place, situated in a similar notch, was but two miles in a straight line across the backbone of the spur; yet Ross had traveled nearly five miles by the more roundabout level course, covering the distance in less than an hour with his swinging stride.

He turned off on the branching lane and took shelter in a clump of bushes twenty yards from the window. The lane led on past the outbuildings and followed the course of a tiny creek that tumbled from the higher hills to the river. This extension of the lane led to a homestead cabin nestling in an open meadow two miles up the creek.

The lighted window served as a frame for the head and shoulders of a man whose impassive, thin-lipped countenance seemed in absolute harmony with the plain severity of the room. Perhaps the most pretentious house in the valley, its interior reflected the life of the occupant. The walls were quite unadorned by pictures or other ornaments, as the floors were devoid of rugs; not a single homelike touch of warmth or coziness.

That was quite in keeping with the owner's whole theory of life, Ross reflected. Jonas Gregory was not the man to squander his dollars for such unessential vanities, or even to permit the installation of any costless trinkets. Owning the bulk of the best land in the valley, it was typical that he should live on this rocky sidehill piece himself, the poorest of all his holdings, and rent the rest to good advantage. There was no dog to raise its voice and apprise Gregory of the skulker outside in the bush, for the scraps which would be required to keep life in a dog could be far better employed in putting fat on a hog.

A shadow momentarily dimmed the window, and a girl crossed to the table and sat down half-facing Gregory, a girl whose charm was so essentially feminine that her presence in that setting of cold simplicity seemed highly incongruous. Mildred Trainor's father, somewhat improvident during his lifetime, had sought to rectify matters on his deathbed by leaving his small affairs in the hands of a capable cousin to administer for his girl. And Gregory had willed that his ward should marry a middle-aged man of his own choosing, stern, frugal and hard-working. But Millie Trainor, isolated in this comfortless habitation, had striven against this and had found one human link connecting her with youth and love and life as she had once known it—all these personified by the young homesteader whose cabin nestled up the creek and who rode so frequently through the lane.

All of this mattered nothing to the man who lurked outside except in so far as it concerned his own immediate plans. Ross divided his attention between the house and the lane. He listened intently, and his eyes sought to pierce the obscurity beyond the corrals. It was apparent that he expected a possible interruption from that quarter.

Gregory addressed the girl; and his voice, precise and passionless, matched the impassivity of his face. Ross was familiar with the substance of the discourse, having frequently listened in before; and Gregory's text was ever the same.

"He's a loafer and a waster," Gregory proclaimed; and Ross knew he referred to young Matt Caulkins, who lived up the creek. "Riding the hills when he should be at some honest work!"

"The Major pays him two thousand dollars a season for guiding his rent," the girl defended. "That's more than the best of your renters makes in a solid year."

"Money so gained shall not profit a man," Gregory stated.

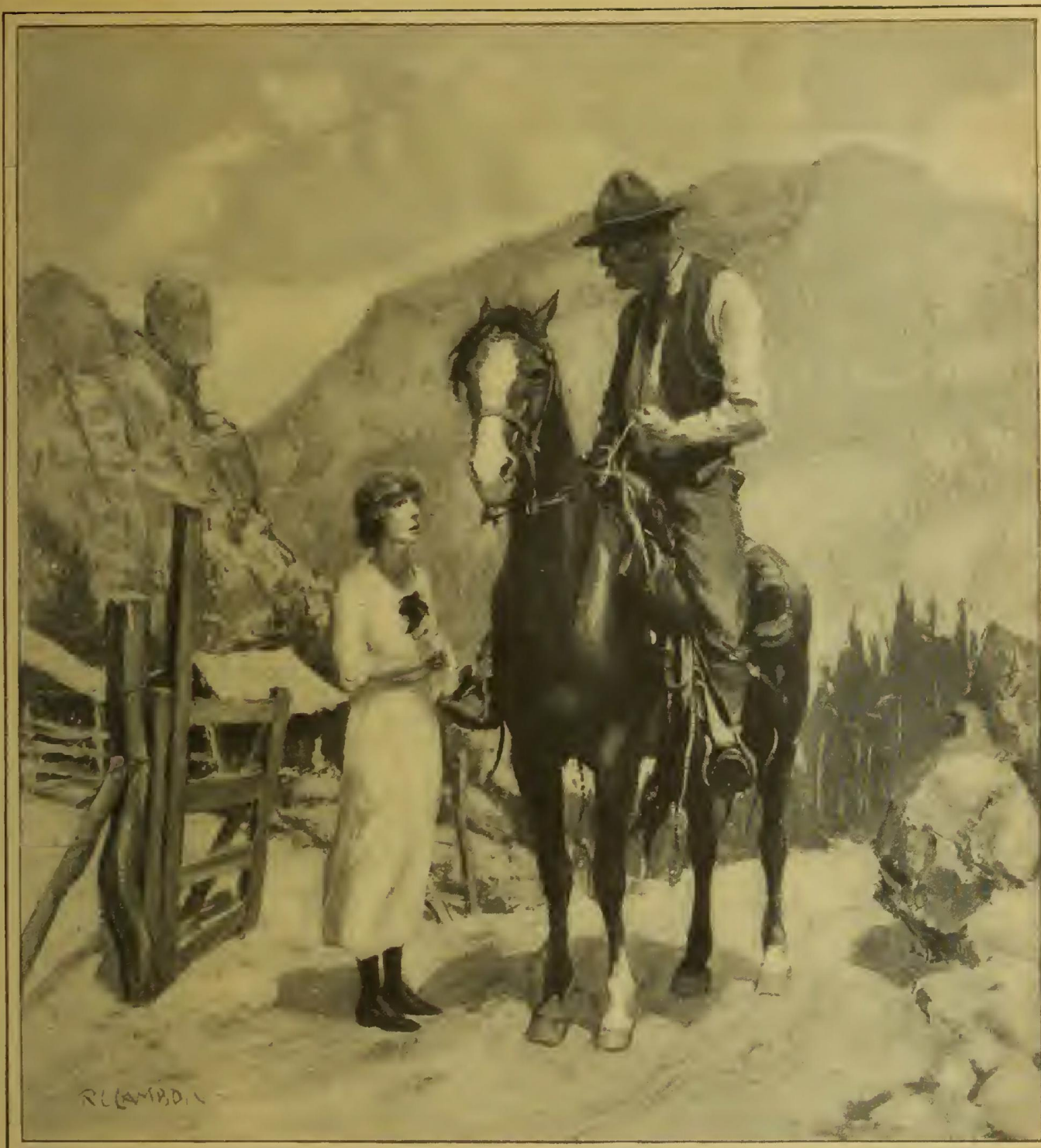
They had covered this ground frequently before, and the girl was not impressed by his dollar-righteousness.

An owl raised its voice from down behind the corrals, and Ross crouched deeper into the sheltering bushes, his eyes trained on the spot from which the hoot had sounded. Presently the girl rose, busied herself for a moment in the kitchen, and slipped quietly from the back door. Ross knew that somewhere near the corrals she had met the man who was the subject of the recent controversy. Her uncle read on undisturbed, and in less than ten minutes she had returned to the house.

ROSS waited only to make sure Caulkins had departed before leaving his hiding place. Instead of returning by the road, he headed up the side of the spur. The timber had been cut from the lower slopes, and a heavy second-growth had sprung up to cover the scars. He made his way through this, then veered to the left toward a pine-sag that loomed against the sky, tacked back toward an outcropping ledge of rocks, and from that point laid his course for a lone spruce that stood sky-lined on the rims above. These landmarks had served to guide his footsteps on many another night. Once over the rims, he struck an old game-trail that led through the timber on the mile-wide flat-top of the spur, an ancient crossing worn by countless hoofs in the days when game had ranged the lower country.

Ross paused in his stride as a faint report sounded from far back in the hills. He had heard these reports rather frequently of late, and always at night. A rumor, emanating from Jonas Gregory, held Matt Caulkins responsible for these shots; too shiftless even to hunt for game, he was said to set spring-guns on the trails in defiance of the law. Gregory had twice reported his suspicions to the sheriff, but in lieu of more convincing proof, that officer had declined to move against Caulkins on such flimsy evidence as the sound of occasional rifle-shots in the hills at night.

Ross dropped down the far slope of the spur and entered the window he had left some hours before. He removed the moccasins and thrust them beneath the mattress. When he entered the main room, the hands of the clock pointed to eleven-fifteen, and with the light of a flickering match he turned them back to nine fifty-five, applied the match to the lamp-wick and knocked



on Aunty Hodges' door. She found him seated, his head propped in his hands, and in five minutes she placed a cup of steaming coffee before him.

"I can get to sleep after I down this," he said by way of thanks. "It's the only thing that seems to help."

The old lady nodded her sympathy as she glanced at the clock, reflecting that the attack had lasted nearly two hours. She left him sipping the scalding coffee, and returned to her room. Shortly thereafter, Ross reset the clock and sought his bed.

The following day, just as Ross prepared to return from the field for the noon-hour, two men rode past on the valley road. Matt Caulkins waved a casual greeting to the man in the field. Ross knew that the small, oldish man who rode with Caulkins was the Major, of whom the girl had spoken the previous night. It was said that the Major was interested in the most ridiculous trivialities, that he would sit all day beside an anthill and watch the industrious colonists at work. He had been known to revisit a bird's nest every day for two weeks to note the growth and

"Oh, do something!" she begged. "Everybody is against Matt."

development of the fledglings. And for accompanying him through the hills on such missions as these, he paid Matt Caulkins an absurdly high

price. Some had pointed out where he could effect a substantial saving by employing them at half the figure, but the Major had declined on the ground that Caulkins, being rather well versed in such matters himself, was consequently valuable as an assistant.

During the noon meal Aunty Hodges discussed the feud between Gregory and young Matt Caulkins. The valley had become more strictly a small-farming community than was typical of the surrounding country as a whole, where big outfits were the rule, and valley dwellers were well-posted on all their neighbors' affairs. The little old lady had small respect for Jonas Gregory's outlook upon life, but Ross offered a mild defense of the man's stand in regard to his ward.

"He's a just man, Gregory is," he said, "and a wise one. The girl's not of age, and too young to decide for herself. Gregory will never do anything but what is absolutely right."

"Oh, no, he'll never do a wrong thing in his life—or a human one," Auntie Hodges stated. "Always right and righteous, always harsh and hard; that's Jonas! Don't I know him, though? Matt's a nice boy. He's a human being, and Jonas is a frozen conscience. Millie will be of age in a few more months, and then she can do as she likes."

"But Mr. Gregory has her best interests at heart," Ross insisted. "He's a man that makes very few mistakes in judgment."

It was well known that Ross cherished a profound respect for all that Jonas Gregory stood for in the world. On several occasions, when others had mentioned Gregory in disparaging vein, Ross had spoken up in his defense.

WHEN Ross returned to the field, he performed his work mechanically, his mind occupied with the one thing which had become the guiding factor of his nature.

Every human mind must have some point or purpose that furnishes an interest in life. The most aimless drifter cherishes some fond hope or desire, no matter how slender the chance of attainment; for the human brain, in order to carry on, must have some goal. Ross had found his incentive in hate, the desire to exact the penalty from the man he deemed responsible for his wrecked ambitions. This thought had sustained him through the years and supplied an objective upon which to hang his thoughts.

His plans were now complete, and he checked them over to discover a possible flaw in his reckoning, but failed to uncover a single weak link. He had planned well. His very existence had been forgotten through the years. His release had been a matter of so little importance that the press had failed to comment upon it. Instead of returning to the village of his youth, he had learned by roundabout inquiries that the one man whom he planned to meet again had long since moved to a far locality where land was cheap. Ross had not sought him out at once, but had tramped the country for a year, living an outdoor life and learning the duties of a farm-hand. The prison pallor had been replaced by a coat of rich tan by the time he had come to the valley and found a place on the Auntie Hodges farm. His true identity had been lost long since, and he had built up a reputation as a steady, plodding farm laborer. From the very first he had been subject to these night attacks which furnished opportunity for him to prowl the countryside. The years had changed him, and his face had failed to stir even a flicker of recognition in Jonas Gregory. No living soul suspected the enmity he cherished toward the man; on the contrary, Ross had established the idea that he entertained a profound respect for Gregory. The feud between Caulkins and Gregory helped his purpose. He could not have asked a better stage-setting. Soon now—perhaps in a week or possibly not for a period of months; it mattered little to Ross—Jonas Gregory would discover the identity of the owl that hooted from the corrals and summoned the girl from the house three or four nights a week. Discovery would mean an actual fight, or at least an intensification of the present ill-feeling between the two. Gossip would speed word of the affair throughout the valley. Then Ross would strike.

Since that first meeting with the sheriff on the hotel porch, Ross had weighed every possibility, endeavoring to eliminate that chance element which the sheriff designated as the "drop-in." He had faithfully studied the habits of every neighbor; yet even with this knowledge at his command, he had on several occasions run afoul of the drop-in, personified by neighbors straying from their regular ways. In each instance he had managed to conceal himself in the brush by the roadside and escape detection, but the margin had been too narrow for comfort.

The sheriff had been right. One slip would be fatal to his plans. If he were seen and recognized, then that strange malady which clutched him on certain evenings would loom up as a very apparent deception and rouse the suspicion that he had prowled the valley for no good purpose on a score of nights. For another month Ross waited patiently. Several times he heard the report of a rifle from the hills at night; and by day, as he worked in the field, he practiced the hoot of an owl.

EVENTUALLY there came a day when the valley was abuzz with the news that Gregory had discovered Matt Caulkins and Millie Trainor trysting in the shadows an hour after nightfall. There had been a rather trying scene, the gossip went, and Jonas had threatened to apply a blacksnake whip to Matt Caulkins if ever he set foot upon the Gregory place again. This affair fitted in even more admirably than Ross had hoped. Now was his time, while the countryside speculated upon the outcome.

Some days after the occurrence, Caulkins rode down the valley in midafternoon. Ross noted that his rifle reposed in its usual place in the saddle-scabbard. If Caulkins followed his regular custom, he would return in the evening, for it was seldom that he stayed in Marsten overnight on his infrequent trips to town. A half-hour after dark Ross was seized by one of his periodical attacks. Auntie Hodges retired at twelve minutes past eight—and at eight-thirteen Ross dropped from his window. On this occasion he had removed another article from his secret cache beneath the mattress, a rifle of the same make and caliber as the one Matt Caulkins carried on his rambles through the hills.

Except for one point, upon which he must make doubly sure, Ross would have taken the route across the spur; but there was a possibility that Caulkins, traveling at a swifter pace on his horse, might pass the Gregory place before he reached it, and in the event that the young homesteader should reach his cabin and be in the Major's company at a certain time, he would have a most perfect alibi, which was no part of the plan Ross had in mind. He covered the five miles of road at a swift trot, momentarily fearing that Caulkins would overtake and pass him, but he reached the Gregory place without having heard a sound to indicate the other man's approach.

Ross stationed himself some seventy yards from the window, availing himself of the cover afforded by the strip of heavy brush on the far side of the lane. Gregory was reading, his head bowed over the table, and the girl sat across from him, engaged in some sort of needlework. A half-hour passed; Ross caught the sound of hoofs on the road. The horseman turned up the lane, and as he neared the man in the brush, the horse loosed a whistling snort of surprise and fear, crowding to the far side of the lane. Caulkins quieted his mount and urged him past the point which he seemed so reluctant to approach. Ross silently cursed the animal and his own lack of foresight in not considering such a contingency in advance. His choosing a stand so near the lane might easily have resulted in the animal's betraying his presence. Both Gregory and the girl lifted their eyes from their work at the thud of the hoofs on the lane, knowing well the identity of the horseman.

It was not until he estimated that Caulkins had covered half the distance to his own cabin that Ross left his place of concealment. It would not do to give him time to reach home. The sound of a shot might carry that far, and the Major could swear that the boy had been with him when it was fired. Ross moved across the lane and stationed himself behind a tree. He took a cartridge from his pocket and thrust it into the magazine of the rifle, then worked the lever and threw it into the chamber. His fingers fumbled awkwardly at the task, for he was unfamiliar with firearms, never having fired a gun more than half a dozen times in his life. When the lock closed on the shell, he raised his voice in an imperfect imitation of the hoot of an owl.

AGAIN Gregory and the girl looked up from their work; their glances met across the table, the girl's eyes widening in sudden apprehension, while Gregory's narrowed with anger.

Jonas rose from his chair and came outside. Ross had intended to reveal his true identity by giving a name which Jonas would remember from the days before he had come to this part of the country. He wanted Gregory to know the reason for his end, and the hand by which he was to fall; but Ross now recognized that this was impossible. The girl had come through the kitchen and now stood outlined in the doorway. If Ross spoke his name, the day was lost. So instead of the anticipated conversation, he fired from behind the tree before Gregory was aware of his presence.

It seemed to him that the report crashed on the stillness of the night with a roar like that of a quarry-blast, and he suddenly feared that Caulkins might return to investigate. But there was one thing yet to be done before he fled. The empty shell must be ejected and left on the spot as one more link in a perfect chain of evidence. He had schooled himself on this point, repeating the necessity of it to himself, lest he should forget in the excitement of the moment. He fumbled at the lever and threw out the shell as the girl called anxiously from the doorway.

After gaining the shelter of the slashing, Ross felt absolutely safe. What could it matter if Caulkins did return to investigate? It would only mean another black mark against him if he were seen round the place immediately after the shot. Ross gained the crest of the spur and followed the game-trail. When halfway across, his nostrils were assailed by a disagreeable odor. He slowed his pace, wondering if some animal had died along the trail since his last trip. The scent (Continued on page 136)

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It required a full half-hour of apology, protestation, entreaty and fulsome promises of more salary and a share in the royalties before the new wild spirit of the primitive woman indicated the least symptom of being tamed, before Miss Poole consented to drop her rôle.

"Well, answer me this! Do you admit I have done it?" she demanded.

"Yes!" bleated Mr. Koshland. "But how—"

"Do you admit I have done it all on my own hook?"

"Sure! But the thief that stole all my good property, he—"

"Forget it! I don't need to fake nothing in my professional career. I come out eating my breakfast, don't I?" She picked the fish from the floor and bit into it.

"Yes, you do! But how do you catch 'em?"

"That's my own business! And it's my own business how I got these skins after I played September Morn when the foliage dropped off! I aint sure yet that you aint a piker, Koshland, but we'll let it stand at that, on condition that a new contract is to be drawn. And I want a scenario for a Frozen North picture, seeing I've got the furs!"

Mr. Koshland had a temper of his own when his inquiring disposition had been snubbed. "Keep it to yourself how you

got 'em, if I aint fit to know about the things you do when you're working on the salary I give you. But I think they got so scared they jumped out of their skins when they saw you looking like you say you looked."

"We'll let it go at that, if you say so," retorted Miss Poole stiffly. "But we'll consider that's about enough from you on the subject, Koshland, and that goes for now, and from now on!"

And as the lady said, so it was. And that's all she ever did say!

SHE had come out from the south side of Misery Gore. Mr. Trask marched down over the mountain from the north side. He lugged a croker-sack on his back, and it was stuffed with articles that he never showed to anybody. He found a job as a hired man on a farm, and he always kept his mouth shut about a bear who danced and tried to shake hands and about a—well, Mr. Trask shook his head dubiously when his thoughts ran on that matter and on what he kept hidden in the croker-sack, and he allowed his general explanation to new and inquiring friends to cover the whole question: he said that he had come out to dwell among human beings because living too long alone in the woods, as a hermit trapper, was apt to "tiddledoo a man's brains, no matter how naturally solid the brains was."

THE DROP-IN

(Continued from page 66)

grew stronger, and he turned his face to the left, seeking to make out the form of some dead animal, but it was too black under the trees, and he could not distinguish objects more than a few feet away. There was a sudden tug at his leg below the knee, as if a vine had grown across the trail, and then—a sudden report jarred his eardrums, and a brilliant flame seemed to spurt straight for his eyes.

For a moment Ross' faculties seemed paralyzed, and he was absolutely blinded. Then he groped ahead. His eyes were gradually readjusted to the night after he had stumbled headlong against three different trees. He felt sick and faint at the realization of his narrow escape. One of Matt Caulkins' spring-guns!

Probably Caulkins had set it there for deer, with a cord stretched a foot above the trail; or perhaps it had been baited for bobcat or bear, which would account for the pungent smell. It must have been a shotgun, judging from the intensity of the flash, and Ross shuddered at the thought. It occurred to him that the thing had been trained in such a manner that it would strike a deer behind the shoulder, and this accounted for the fact that the charge had failed to riddle him. The buckshot had passed behind him. He felt the back of his coat to determine if the slack of the cloth had been pierced by the shot. The garment seemed intact, but he experienced a queer squirming sensation in the small of his back at the knowledge that the slugs could not have missed his spine by more than six inches.

Ross turned aside and dropped the rifle down a crevice in the rocks, having se-

lected the place long ago. Shortly thereafter he knocked softly at Auntie Hodges' door. She came forth to prepare his coffee and before retiring she observed that it was not yet ten o'clock. After she had retired, Ross reset the clock at eleven-thirty and sought his room. The thing had gone through as planned, without a hitch; yet more clearly than ever before, he saw the logic of the sheriff's theory of the unknown element. Twice that night the grisly apparition of the drop-in had loomed beside him and stretched forth its long claws—once when Caulkins' horse had winded him, again when the spring-gun had belched forth its leaden slugs to search for him in the night. There was sound logic in this drop-in stuff that the sheriff preached.

The next morning Ross worked in the field with a sense of expectancy. The girl would have gone at once to some neighbor's house, and some one would have started for the Forest Service cabin to telephone the news to Marsten. Early in the morning three different neighbors came in separately to carry the tidings to Ross and Auntie Hodges. The coroner drove past before nine o'clock, and an hour later the sheriff and a deputy passed up the road. Ross attempted to visualize Turner's arrival at the deserted Gregory place, none there to greet him save the coroner and the dead man sprawled where he had fallen.

BUT the reality of Turner's arrival was in no way similar to the one Ross pictured. The sheriff found a score of neighbors clustered round the place, each one

eager to render his own opinion on the case. Turner listened carefully and decided that every version was based solely on the narrator's knowledge of the feud between Caulkins and Gregory, not on any fact at all relative to the actual shooting. One bit of real evidence was the empty cartridge which one man handed to him along with the information that Caulkins' rifle was the only one in the neighborhood that carried that particular type of shell. Another neighbor, living a mile down the road, volunteered the information that Matt had stopped at his place on the homeward way, riding away from his house not to exceed thirty minutes before he heard the sound of the shot.

The girl was inside, and Turner sought her for a private conference.

"Suppose you tell me what all happened, Millie," he instructed.

The girl recited the bare facts, and Turner shook his head.

"That won't do, girl," he said. "You're holding something back on the old sheriff. What do you know that you're afraid will hurt Matt Caulkins' chances?"

"You too!" the girl said bitterly. "Everyone takes it for granted that Matt did it; and I know he didn't, even if all the facts point to him as they say. Matt didn't do a thing like that. He couldn't. Don't I know? An' I'm not going to say one thing you could use against him."

"Don't need a thing to use against Matt, Millie," Turner stated. "He's convicted twice over, just as matters stand. Don't you see I'm not trying to work up a case against the boy? The case is already built complete. A few more damaging facts can't make his present fix one bit worse than what it is right now—but there may be one out of the lot that'll uncover a new lead pointing somewhere else. What I'm trying to do now is to discover if there's a possibility that Matt *didn't* do it. Now you go ahead and tell me everything you know, no matter how slack it looks on the surface. Had Matt been round here earlier?"

"He rode up the lane ten minutes before—before it happened," she confessed. "At least, I heard a horse go through."

"And how did Gregory happen to go outside?" he asked.

The girl's head dropped wearily.

"An owl hooted from out in the yard," she said.

"An owl," the sheriff repeated. "Was that some sort of a signal Gregory knew about?"

She shook her head, then looked up at the sheriff and gripped his arm. "I'm going to tell you," she said. "That was a signal Matt used to call me from the house. Mr. Gregory learned about it a week or so back and warned Matt off the place. Don't you see that Matt wouldn't use that signal again?" She gave his arm a savage little shake. "He wouldn't; don't you see?" she insisted.

"It certainly does look as if Matt had set out to convict himself," the sheriff remarked. He turned the empty shell in his hand. "Never saw a more perfect set of evidence. He didn't leave out a thing—except maybe mailing in a written confession in advance; even that couldn't be any more conclusive. Anything else you can call to mind?"

"No, that's all," she returned. "Wait—there was another thing—a second shot. I'd forgotten. It was while I was going down the road maybe half an hour later." She pointed up toward the crest of the ridge. "I heard another shot that came from up there, near as I could tell."

Turner's eyes searched her face to determine if she were manufacturing a bit of evidence which might help Matt Caulkins. He decided she was telling what she believed to be the truth.

"Sure?" he asked. "Couldn't have been a stick popped or something?"

"No, it was a shot," she insisted.

"Well, I'll ride on up and see Matt and the Major," Turner said. "Try not to worry too much, girl. Maybe things will break all right for you and Matt."

HE instructed the deputy to remain until his return and rode on up the lane. Caulkins' cabin was unoccupied, and he assumed that Matt and the Major were off somewhere in the hills. He settled down to wait, but the hours passed without a sign of either man. Turner decided to remain throughout the night. It was near midnight when he heard a horse nicker from somewhere upcountry. Five minutes later Matt rode down through the meadow, leading a saddled horse and two pack-horses. The Major was nowhere to be seen.

It occurred to Turner that Matt might have disposed of the Major as well, lest his testimony should prove damaging. But what the Major could tell of the time of Matt's arrival could not possibly be so damaging as the tale of the neighbor from whose house he had departed just prior to the shooting, Turner reflected. Caulkins put up the horses and came to the house. Turner accosted him as he opened the door.

"Set your rifle down and strike a light, Matt," the sheriff said. "It's Turner. I've been sent up after you. Tell you about it soon as we get settled."

He watched the man outlined in the doorway as he deposited his rifle against the jamb and scratched a match.

"What's up—that you're wanting me?" Caulkins demanded as the match flared. He held it aloft and peered at the man inside to make sure it was the sheriff, then crossed to the lamp and lighted it.

"Where's the Major?" Turner asked as he motioned Caulkins to a chair.

"Home by now," Caulkins stated. "We gathered up his stuff this morning and packed out across the divide to the railroad. He caught a train at Crandall about six o'clock. That's what made me so late getting back. We didn't leave here till nearly noon. What is it you want me for? That Gregory business, likely. Jonas sick you onto me on account of our little fuss? I expect maybe it's a trespass case."

"It's about Gregory, right enough," Turner said. "But not about trespass. Jonas was called out of the house last night and shot. Folks think it was you."

Point by point Turner recited the evidence against Caulkins and the boy's face betrayed grave concern.

"It looks like I'm in a hole," he admitted. "But you know I didn't do it." He searched Turner's face hopefully. "Why, it looks like I'd planned to con-

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vict myself. I heard the shot when I was halfway home. I wish now I'd gone back."

"Did the Major hear the shot?" Turner queried.

The boy nodded.

"He'd gone to bed, but he heard it," Caulkins said. "Asked me what I was shooting at down the road. Say, this is pretty rotten," he observed as he realized the significance of his admission that the Major too had attributed the shot to him.

"It's almost too damned perfect," Turner said. "Try and think, now. Do you know anybody that held a grudge against Jonas?"

"Well, he was no friend of mine," Caulkins stated bluntly, "but I don't recall any man who had any grudge."

The boy's mind was plainly occupied with speculating as to how this thing would affect the girl. Would she believe in him in the face of all the evidence against him. It was not until his horse shied at a fluttering paper as they rode down the road the following morning, that he thought of a single point which might help him. The animal had acted strangely that night as he rode up the lane. He related this instance to Turner.

"Likely a bobcat or a coyote after one of Gregory's chickens," he said. "But at the time it occurred to me that maybe Jonas was out there watching to see if I'd call Millie outside. Then I saw him through the window and forgot about it until right now."

TURNER sent Matt to Marsten with the deputy while he himself remained at the Gregory house. Millie had gone to stay with a neighbor, and he had the place to himself. He searched the strip of brush on the far side of the lane and found the spot where some man had been concealed. There was not a doubt of it, for the brush was pressed back, and the ground was clear of fallen leaves. The restless shifting of the prowler had pressed down the soft earth, and the prints of his knees were quite evident.

"So much for that," Turner mused. "But by itself it don't amount to a straw. That owl's call, now; he must have been hanging round here pretty frequent, prowling near sometime when Matt called the girl outside, in order to have learned that call." He knelt in the brush and peered toward the window, taking in every other place of possible concealment which would still afford a view of the room in which Gregory was accustomed to read of evenings. In the small patch of bushes a few yards from the window he found ample evidence that it had been occupied by a heavy body; broken twigs and worn patches of earth testified to this. But the signs were old.

Turner climbed the spur to discover if possible the source of that second shot which Millie Trainor had heard. He angled along the slope and struck the crest a half-mile down-country from the house, but as he crossed it, he failed to discover a sign of any human having preceded him. As he moved slowly through the trees, he checked off every man in the valley. In order to be free to prow the Gregory place night after night, a man must have some definite excuse for being absent from home. All the settlers

were men with families. Their absences would be noted; and there was no single man living alone so that he could come and go without comment.

He reached the far edge of the spur and turned up along the rims. Auntie Hodges' cabin nestled far below him, and he could see Ross working with a team in the field. He came suddenly across an old game-trail that dipped down through a break in the rims, and he followed it back across the ridge toward the Gregory place.

When halfway across, Turner stopped to investigate a strange odor. There was ample proof that some one had been prowling round this particular point—numerous footprints within a certain limited space, a cut sapling with the limbs trimmed off. Turner decided that a trap had recently been set thereabouts for marten or bobcat; the strange scent sprinkled round to draw them to the spot indicated as much, though it was a little early for trapping. He noted three holes in a triangle some ten feet to one side of the trail, as if some one had jabbed the ground aimlessly with some pointed instrument, perhaps a trap-stake or a walking staff. He would ask Matt if he had set a trap there.

The trail led him out above the Gregory place, and he dropped down the slope to where he had left his horse tied in the yard. As he neared the house of the next neighbor below, Millie Trainor came out to the road to meet him.

"I've been waiting," she said. "Did you find out anything that will help him?"

"Nothing to speak of, Millie—nothing at all, you might say," was the reply. "But maybe something will turn up. Rest easy in your mind. We'll find out something for our side yet."

But the girl was not to be comforted by such evasive assurances.

"Oh, do something!" she begged. "Please! Promise me you'll find out who it was. Everbody is against Matt except me."

"Likely," Turner assented. "Everyone but you and me. Between us we'll give 'em all a big surprise. You just wait and see how the old sheriff will fool 'em when the time comes." He turned, leaving the girl leaning against the gate-post, watching him as he rode away.

"Now, that's just pure hell for a fact," Turner commented aloud. "She knows I didn't find out anything that could be used—and I'm the only hope she's got."

As he rode on around the point of the spur, his thoughts kept reverting to the old trail that led across it. Somehow it seemed a direct link between the Gregory place and Auntie Hodges' cabin. This idea was vaguely associated in his mind with something he had heard about Ross. What was it? The connection failed to rise to the surface of his consciousness, but just as he drew even with the mouth of the lane, he recalled that Ross had sinking spells, a fact well known to the whole countryside. He turned up the lane and dropped from his horse before the cabin.

"I'm three-fourths starved," he told Auntie Hodges. "No one has thought to offer me a bite all day. You couldn't fix an old friend up with a glass of milk and a slab of pie, now, could you?"

Aunty Hodges was volubly glad to entertain him and to discuss the Gregory affair. In parting, Turner inquired after Ross. Were his sinking spells worse these days? They discussed the symptoms at length, and Aunty Hodges gave it as her opinion that Ross would be taken off in one of them. It seemed the spells came on only in the evenings, apparently induced by hard work in the field—that any sound drove him mad, and that absolute quiet in the seclusion of his room seemed to afford the only relief. Then later he would wake her up to give him strong black coffee. The spells lasted nearly two hours as a rule; in the case of the last one, for instance—on the night of the shooting—Ross had called her at a quarter of ten, and the spell had come on at eight.

TURNER rode away, his mind besieged by fragmentary scraps of thought, disconnected yet pointing in one direction, and he endeavored to marshal these floating bits into one cohesive whole.

Presuming that another man, not Matt, had left the marks which indicated some persistent nightly prowler in the brush around the Gregory house, then that man must have a powerful motive to have urged him to plan so far ahead. These attacks that Ross suffered, provided they were faked, would afford an opportunity to prowl the countryside without the knowledge of another soul. The trail that led straight across the spur, and the signs of recent usage, that second shot which the girl believed she had heard from the ridge, what explained these? But the motive was absolutely lacking. It could not have been an attempted robbery, for Jonas never kept a trinket worth stealing.

Once the theory of robbery was dispensed with, it automatically eliminated the possibility that Gregory had discovered the man by accident and was shot down on that score. The thing had been timed too well, when the boy was halfway to his cabin; and there was the owl's hoot to draw Gregory from the house, and the shell of the same caliber as that used in Matt's rifle. There had never been a whisper of any enmity between Gregory and Ross; yet in order to follow Turner's present line of reasoning to a logical conclusion, he must concede a sustained and deadly hatred on the part of Ross.

"It seems too fantastic, sort of," Turner confessed aloud. "I couldn't even prove it to my own satisfaction, much less to a jury of twelve men. If he did do it, then it's the most perfectly planned thing to date, so perfect that one little slip would break it into bits; but where's the slip? This time, I guess, the drop-in is not going to operate."

The recollection of the girl's troubled eyes and her pleas that he should do something for the boy persisted in the background of his thoughts to trouble him. And suddenly he slapped the pommel of his saddle with such violence that the horse leaped ahead and broke into a lope.

"The Major!" he announced. "It's got to be the Major. Matt Caulkins setting spring-guns, the shot the girl heard on the ridge, those three little holes alongside the trail. That's it. The Major is the drop-in. He's got to be!"

AN hour later a car bore Turner swiftly toward the railroad and from that point a train carried him on toward the city a hundred miles distant, where the Major lived. It was nearly midnight when the Major roused from slumber and, attired in bathrobe and pajamas, blinked sleepily at the sheriff and listened to a half-dozen questions before attempting a reply, then answered them all in order.

"Yes, I had a set there. Took it up the morning before I left. It was sprung, right enough. Yes, makes considerable noise; I use a pistol with an open cartridge, and loose powder to fire 'em: makes it sure even on a damp night. Of course it's possible. I've picked up all sorts of odd trash at times, horses, cows and once even a tinkering goat. Great disappointment, that sort of thing, when you're expecting better game. Morning wont do? You want to get back tonight? Well, as long as it may help Matt—Didn't read the papers this evening so didn't know."

The Major retired to his dark-room, and the sheriff turned the leaves of an album filled with portraits of wild things photographed in their native haunts. Everything from beetles to bears stared back at him from the pages.

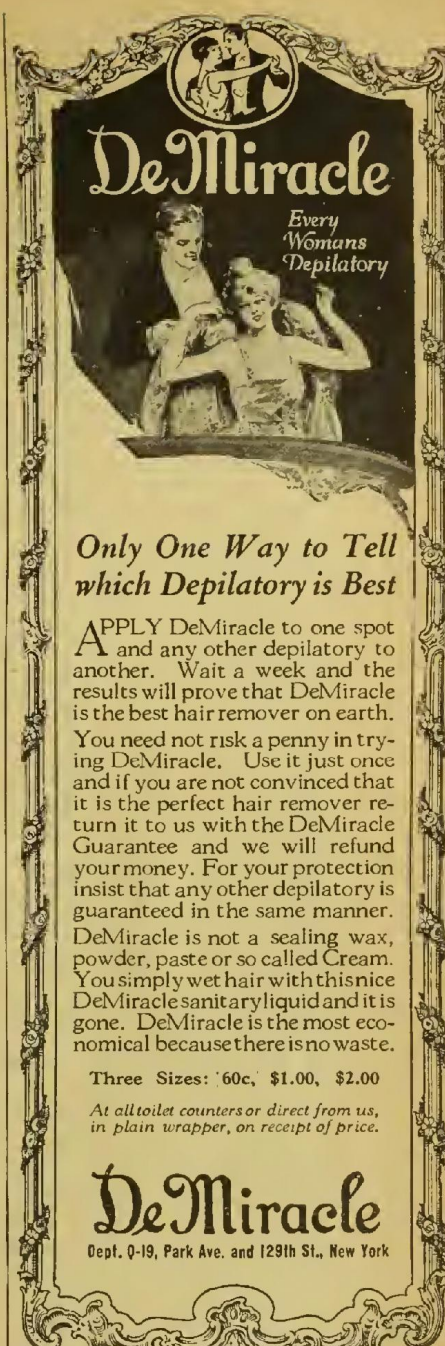
An hour passed. Then the Major returned and handed Turner a wet print.

"Got him," he announced. "Strange sort of affair, don't you think? Must have given him an awful start. Seems like he'd have stopped and smashed the machine otherwise. Good thing you came today. I always weed out all but the best and burn 'em up. No use keeping a lot of trash around. Likely this would have been a cinder by noon tomorrow. And they thought it was Matt, you say?"

The sheriff regarded the print in silence. A face glared at him from the paper. One foot was lifted as if to take a step, and a white line showed across the angle—the cord that had tripped the camera. A rifle showed clearly in the man's hand.

"The drop-in," Turner softly exulted. "The most perfectly planned crime I ever heard of—and the most rock-riveted, mortal certainty of conviction that ever came into my hands. The two extremes! Major, the drop-in operates."

ROSS lay awake in Aunty Hodges' cabin. His mind was at rest. Only one thing remained to be done. Even that was unnecessary, but no small point should be overlooked. He would burn the moccasins on the morrow. Shortly past noon of the following day he equipped himself with ax and saw, thrust the moccasins beneath his coat, and set off on foot up the wood-road that led into the gulch along the base of the spur. He cut a load of stove-wood, piling and burning the brush, and the moccasins were consigned to the flames. Ross shouldered his tools and headed for home in the early dusk, the last link of his scheme complete. Not one scrap remained to connect him with the killing, and no human agency could point to him now. He smiled a grim smile of self-congratulation over a thing so brilliantly conceived and carried to such a perfect conclusion. Then his grin faded into a stare of cold apprehension. For just ahead, seated on a log with his rifle across his knee, the sheriff waited at the bend of the lane.



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